N° 77. SATURDAY, *July* 22, 1786.

Species Virtutibus ſimiles. TAC.

BESIDES the great incitements to depravity or ill-conduct which paſſion and intereſt hold forth, there are other temptations to vice, other apologies for the want of virtue, which, as they leſs ſhock the ingenuous feelings of our nature, are perhaps fully as dangerous as motives which apparently are of a much more powerful kind. We are often led aſtray by habits, which in ſingle actions ſeemed unimportant or venial; we are ſeduced by opinions, to which a ſort of plauſible fallacy gives the ſhew of reaſon. Sometimes we hide our errors and our weakneſs under the veil of virtue, and aſcribe to ourſelves the merit of good qualities from circumſtances, which, if juſtly conſidered, ſhould cover us with blame. At other times we are contented to wear the livery, though we are not in the ſervice of Virtue, and pride ourſelves on ſpeaking her language, though we do not conform our actions to her precepts.

I happened lately to ſpend a day in company with a gentleman whoſe appearance prepoſſeſſed

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me much in his favour, and whose conversation and deportment did not less conciliate my good opinion. There was a certain delicacy in his remarks, which bespoke an uncommon elegance of mind; a warmth in his sentiments, which seemed to flow from a high principle of disinterestedness and generosity. After he was gone, I could not help expressing myself very warmly in his commendation, which the friend at whose house we were did not join in so cordial a manner as I expected. When I pressed him a little on that score, he told me that *Woodfort* (so the gentleman was called) had long been a subject of his speculation on human character and conduct. "Woodfort (said he), "in manner and conversation, is always the "elegant and interesting man you saw him. "Nay, he possesses, I believe, in reality those "feelings which he knows so well how to ex-"press. I have frequently found him weeping "at the perusal of a tender novel, and have "seen him struggling to keep down the emo-"tions of his heart at the representation of a "tragedy. You saw how his eye kindled at the "recital of a benevolent or a generous deed, "and at that moment I am persuaded that "Woodfort was benevolent, was generous. "Yet, in real life (for I have had the best "opportunities of knowing it), Woodfort's

"feeling

"feeling and generoſity unaccountably forſake "him. Scarcely ever has he been known to "relieve the diſtreſſes he is ſo willing to pity, "or to exerciſe the generoſity he is ſo ready "to applaud. The tenants on his eſtate are "ſqueezed for rents higher than their farms "can afford; his debtors are haraſſed for pay-"ments, in circumſtances which might often "plead for mitigation or delay. Nay, I know "ſome of his pretty near relations, for relief "of whoſe neceſſities I have applied with ſuc-"ceſs to others, after having in vain ſolicited "Woodfort's aſſiſtance to relieve them."

I confeſs I did not thank my friend for thus undeceiving me, and felt ſomething painful in being obliged to retract an opinion which it had afforded me ſo much pleaſure to form. But afterwards, when I had time to recover from this little ſhock to my feelings which my friend's information had given, I began, like him, to ſpeculate on this ſeeming contrariety of character; and though that of Woodfort may perhaps appear ſingular, I am afraid that, in a certain degree, there are not wanting many inſtances of a ſimilar kind; and that, if we look around us with obſervation, we ſhall frequently diſcover men who appear to feel, nay who really feel much tenderneſs at the tale of woe, and much applauſe at the recitals of generoſity,

who yet, in real conduct and in active life, seldom discover either much generosity or much sensibility.

To account in some measure for this appearance, it may be observed, that when a representation is given of fictitious distress, it is done in such a manner, and with such circumstances accompanying it, as have the most powerful tendency to affect the heart. In a tragedy, where the object is to move, or in a novel, where the author means to produce the sensation of pity, every circumstance which can produce that effect is collected, and every thing which can diminish it is carefully removed. Thus a representation is given of characters and situations, which, though not unnatural, seldom exist; the detached parts may frequently be seen; but all the incidents united together, attended with those circumstances in which they are held out, and accompanied with none of a different or discordant sort, are seldom beheld in real life. The mind, therefore, may be affected with a fictitious story, or a tale of woe, when it will not be affected with a real event occurring in common life; because that real event cannot be perceived in all those strong colours, and mingled with all those attracting circumstances, with which a romantic story may be wrought up. Some circumstances may occur which will

diminish

diminish our interest in the persons who really suffer, while there may be others wanting which would increase our sympathy with their situation. Thus Woodfort may be exceedingly moved by a well-written novel, founded on the oppression of the rich and powerful over the poor and humble; yet, in the case of his own tenants, he may not be affected with their hardships. He may persuade himself it was their own indolence which produced their distress; he may quote instances of landlords who had bettered the condition of their tenants by raising their rents; and set up ideas of public improvement against the feelings of private compassion.

It may be observed further, that when a fictitious story of distress is told, or when a melancholy event happens, which has no connection with ourselves, there is no interfering interest or inclination of our own to diminish our pity or our sensibility. The mind is led to give the sensations that are excited their full sway, and to indulge in them to their utmost extent. Observers upon human nature have frequently remarked, that the contemplation of objects of distress gives a melancholy pleasure to the mind. Persons of sensibility are well acquainted with this pleasure; and when a story of distress is set before them, they feel much enjoyment from

indulging in it. The mind in this ſituation dwells and feeds upon its object, and every tender emotion is called forth. But when a real event happens in life, with which we ourſelves may be in ſome reſpect connected, inſtead of dwelling upon it, or nouriſhing the feeling of diſtreſs which it produces, we may endeavour to avoid it, and to ſhut it out from our thoughts, becauſe its indulgence may interfere with ſome other favourite feeling or inclination. Woodfort, though affected with the repreſentation of diſtreſs, produced by poverty or want in thoſe with whom he had no connection, was not affected with that of his own relations, probably becauſe it hurt his mind to think that he had relations who were poor; and he therefore thruſt the ſubject from his thoughts, as people ſhun thoſe ſcenes in which they once delighted, if they recal misfortune, or record diſgrace.

It muſt alſo be remarked, that the indulgence in that ſenſibility which ariſes from the contemplation of objects of diſtreſs, is apt to produce and to flatter a conſcious vanity in the mind of the perſon who gives way to ſuch indulgence. This vanity turns and reſts upon itſelf, and without leading to action, it foſters a ſelfiſh and contracted approbation of our own feelings, which is catched hold of, and ſerves as a kind of ſub-

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ſtitute in place of the conſciouſneſs of real goodneſs.

It ought likewiſe to be attended to, that the ſenſations which ariſe from the indulgence in repreſentations or tales of diſtreſs with which we ourſelves are unconnected, require no ſort of exertion; the mind repoſes quietly upon the contemplation of the object, without being called forth to action; but when the diſtreſs of others occurs in real life, if we are to relieve it, ſome exertion is neceſſary, and ſome action of our own muſt be performed. Now, a man may take pleaſure in the paſſive feelings of ſenſibility (if that expreſſion may be uſed), when he will avoid every thing which requires active exertion. Hence the mind may be open to the feelings of compaſſion and tenderneſs, may take delight in indulging them, and by that means acquire great acuteneſs of ſenſibility, when it may harden and ſhut itſelf againſt every object, where the giving way to the feelings which ſuch object produces requires real activity and exertion.

To this it may be proper to add, that the very indulgence in the paſſive feelings of ſenſibility has a tendency to produce indolence, languor, and feebleneſs, and to unfit the mind for any thing which requires active and firm exertion. While the mind contemplates diſtreſs, it

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is acted upon, and never acts; and by indulging in this contemplation, it becomes more and more unfit for action: the passive feeling of compassion may increase, but the power requisite to relieve will diminish. On the other hand, a man who has not the same degree of sensibility, or the same disposition to indulge in the contemplation of objects of distress, may, by the possession of a firmer mind, and greater habits of activity, perform many more benevolent and generous actions. The more the passive habit of compassion is indulged without the active *, the weaker will the disposition to activity become: but on the other hand, though by the exertion of the active habit the passive may be diminished; yet by a frequent repetition of benevolent acts, the mind will become more and more disposed to repeat them, and will find the performance more and more easy. He whose nervous sensibility could not bear the sight of a wound, would, in such a case, be incapable, were he otherwise qualified, to assist in its cure; while a person of less delicate feelings, and who is less affected with the sore, will be both more able and more willing to lend his aid in giving relief.

If the above observations be well founded, may we not conclude, that there is often much

* See Butler's Analogy.

danger,

danger, in the education of children, of ſoftening their minds too much, of rendering them too ſuſceptible to general repreſentations of diſtreſs, and of affecting them too frequently and too deeply by fictitious tales of woe. The mind thus affected, may be inſenſible to the proper impreſſion, when the influence of romantic deception is removed, and when real objects of diſtreſs, unattended with the colours in which Novelliſts and Poets exhibit them, are placed before it. Accuſtomed to be affected with objects only that are removed from ourſelves, and where there can be no competition with our own intereſts, we may be unmoved when our own intereſts or other inclinations interfere. In uſe to indulge ſolely in *feeling*, we may ſhrink from the labour of active benevolence, and find in the experience of real life, that the very habit of indulging in the contemplation of diſtreſs, though it may add to our natural ſenſibility, yet, by fatiguing and exhauſting the mind, will give it a feebleneſs, a languor, and an imbecility, which is inconſiſtent with every vigorous and every proper exertion. While therefore a certain degree of ſenſibility ought to be cultivated, we ought at the ſame time to be upon our guard not to puſh it too far; and habits of action ought carefully to be intermixed with our habits of contemplation. We ought ever to

have impressed on our minds the sentiments of one of the most illustrious men that ever lived; of a man who united the most sublime views of contemplation, with the most splendid exertions of activity, in the greatest theatre that history has exhibited to our view; of *Marcus Aur. Antoninus*, that "neither virtue nor vice "consist in passive sentiment, but in action;" "ὀυδὲ ἡ αρετη ϗ κακια εν πέισει, ἀλλα ενεργεία."